

PROBING THE MELANCHOLY THAT REIGNS IN FREAK HALL

By FRANK WARD O'MALLEY.

Zipp, the Original What Is It?—the venerable Mr. Zachary Taylor Zipp, doyen of all sideshow freaks, is flippantly known around his club as perhaps the most dour and downcast figure among a big group of sullen and silent brother and sister artists and actresses seated in a Freak Hall pregnant with pathos last Friday night when the caricaturist and the volunteer critic dropped into Mr. Barnum and Mr. Bailey's circus to pick up material with which to build a critique of the plot of the Greatest Show on Earth.

It was evident at a glance that some impressively depressive news had been slipped within the hour to the all star cast in Freak Hall. Fortunately there was no unimpaired protestant present at the moment to gaze unfeelingly upon great artists nursing a brand new sorrow. The band had struck up the music for the beginning of the Persian Pageant of the Thousand and One Nights some minutes before, so for the time being Freak Hall was deserted except the Messrs. Zipp and Cesare, the Pinheaded Girl, the Fellowes-Hill-Station troupe of panting press agents, Miss Cherry—the Fat Girl—and just a few of the rest of us.

Z. T. Zipp, bowed down with gloom as he sat on his pedestal of honor out in the centre of the hall, was a ringer for the star of the "Thinker" except that Mr. Zipp had thought to throw something loose about his figure. His brother and sister performers in the all star cast who rimmed the hall around three walls had unconsciously assumed the same dejected attitude of mind, thought, the general effect being that of a dull day at an auction of Rodin's stuff.

Only on the pedestal where Mr. Andrew Sturtz, the Tattooed Man, was practicing rapid handsprings and cartwheels was any movement to be noted as we entered. Even the face of Mr. Sturtz was lined with the all pervading grief, however—this despite the exultation which has thrilled the Tattooed Man's soul ever since he conceived the idea a week or more ago to learn to spin his pictorial physique around and around in such a manner that he may later go into business for himself as "The Human Movies."

Once or twice, it is true, some physical agitation might be noted at the extreme right end of the line, where Fred Allen, the Human Fire Eater, recently snarled alive the wilds of Somerset county. Maine was selected between Miss Grace Gilbert, the popular Bearded Belle from New Jersey, and George Day, the Whiskered Whiz, also from Maine, where after years of practice Mr. Day finally broke the world's whisker record by raising a crop of chin chinchillas twelve feet long.

Fred and George and Miss Grace, the Bearded Belle, doubtless would have been suffering on in silent inertia also if it had not been for the fact that Fred, the Human Fire Eater, was in the spasms of hay fever. Consequently, as he would to control his coughs and sneezes, he would break forth in jets of flame every few minutes. Each time the suffering Fire Eater politely turned his head

aside from the Bearded Lady when seized with an attack of coughing he faced the Whiskered Whiz, whereupon there was danger of the fire spreading to the natural lameness of the world's record Whiskered Whiz.

If the Fire Eater turned his features the other way the Bearded Belle had to jump or suffer a four alarm since that threatened to ruin her most striking facial characteristics.

Therefore, although George and Fred and Miss Grace doubtless were as deeply depressed as Mr. Zachary Zipp and the others over the same sad news—the nature of which we were to learn later—which had caused a sort of pathetic coma in all other parts of Freak Hall, the two bearded persons and Fred Allen were in a state that made physical action at times unavoidable. The Whiskered Whiz finally hit upon the happy thought of changing pedestals with Fred Allen, the fire fletcherizer, thus putting Fred at the end of the line, where he could sputter sparks and sheets of flame over his right shoulder without inconveniencing the others.

George Day before sinking back into the popular Rodin pose affected by the others made doubly sure of his own safety first. He arranged the last few yards of his whiskers in a pile of neatly folded skeins and then put the bundle on the pedestal top to his left, or next to the Bearded Belle's chair and far from Fred Allen and his spasms. And the Bearded Belle settled down and tried to resume her composure by taking up her tarting and going off with any vulgar notion of neatly folded skeins and their left, or next to the Bearded Belle's chair and far from Fred Allen and his spasms.

For a while then the pyrotechnic paroxysms of Fred Allen and the clicking of the needles of the industrious Bearded Belle were the only bits of movement all along the pedestals. Here, we decided, was as good a time as any to stroll over to Mr. Zipp's pedestal delicately to offer him our sympathy and help in this his hour of sorrow, not with any vulgar notion in mind of trying to worm from him the cause of the general grief but merely as a couple of fellow artists in sympathy with our downcast colleagues.

But while we were debating in whispers about the most delicate method of inflicting ourselves upon Mr. Zipp there was another interruption from the far end of the line. This time, however, Mr. Allen and his overdose of flame were only indirectly the cause of the commotion.

It happened, so we learned a moment later, that in leaning over from her chair to pick up some skeins of gray silk tarting yarn which the Bearded Belle had dropped from her lap she had accidentally picked up a handful of the ends of George Day's neatly piled whiskers lying between her chair and the Whiskered Whiz.

Then, doubtless because of her agitated condition, she had thoughtlessly knitted about two skeins of George's whiskers into the half finished muffler before noticing her mistake.

George Day, it seems, had been so occupied with brooding and brooding that he had not observed that anything was on the tapis, or whatever the French expression is for having one's whiskers accidentally knitted into evering muffers for Serbian soldiers. In furtive haste the Bearded Belle tried to pick out her most recent stitches without breaking George's beard and heart. But, as in the case of tangled trout lines, haste was the last thing that should have entered into the process.

To make matters worse the Whiskered Whiz suddenly turned to the Bearded Belle where she was kneeling to spend the Whiskered Whiz's such trivial question. Looking directly into his eyes to hold his attention and knitting again violently by the touch system for the moment so that George Day would not notice that anything

was amiss, the Bearded Belle made some light remark in reply and so saved the situation temporarily.

But it was only temporary. The minute George Day had resumed his Rodin pose once again and Miss Grace had hurriedly turned back to continue her work of surreptitiously untangling George's whiskers from the muffler the commotion occurred which had interrupted us just as we started toward Mr. Zipp to commune with him.

The interruption came first in the form of a sharp little cry from the Bearded Belle when she had tried to turn her head all the way back to her normal tating position. The Bearded Belle, we soon learned, during her brief conversation with the Whiskered Whiz and while tating by the touch system had thoughtlessly tatted a skein of her own weeping willows in among the combined strands of the

silk yarn and George Day's whiskers. Then as soon as she had turned her head back to her work her own beard, brought comparatively short, had brought her chin up with a sudden jerk. George Day turned and grasped the whole situation in a moment. Once he had assured himself that he could be untatted from Miss Grace and the muffler without damage to the skeins of his own trailing arbutus he calmed her fears. Then he helped her slowly and carefully to untat themselves without any damage to their own personal adornments which could not be furnished up later by a bit of mactelling. But, as Miss Grace confided after the performance at a little supper party in the Ring, she had not been so embarrassed, she said, since one day when she was a young girl just beginning to shave during the winter months she mislaid her razors

and had to go in among a lot of horrid men in John Barber's and buy a once over.

The accidental tating of the beards and muffler had created a diversion which for brief minutes took the minds of Mr. Zipp, his pretty niece, Miss Schiltzie—the Pinheaded Girl—and their conferees off their great secret sorrow. The gloom lifted only a high enough, however, to slam back upon the assemblage with a crash. Thereupon Mr. Zipp and the other artists and actresses all began to do a Rodin again.

"Cheer up, Miss Schiltzie. Perhaps it isn't true," Mr. Cesare said with affected gaiety in the Pinheaded language, the only tongue which Miss Schiltzie understands. The remark was thrown off, of course, with the hope that it would cheer the young lady and Uncle Zipp, who also speaks

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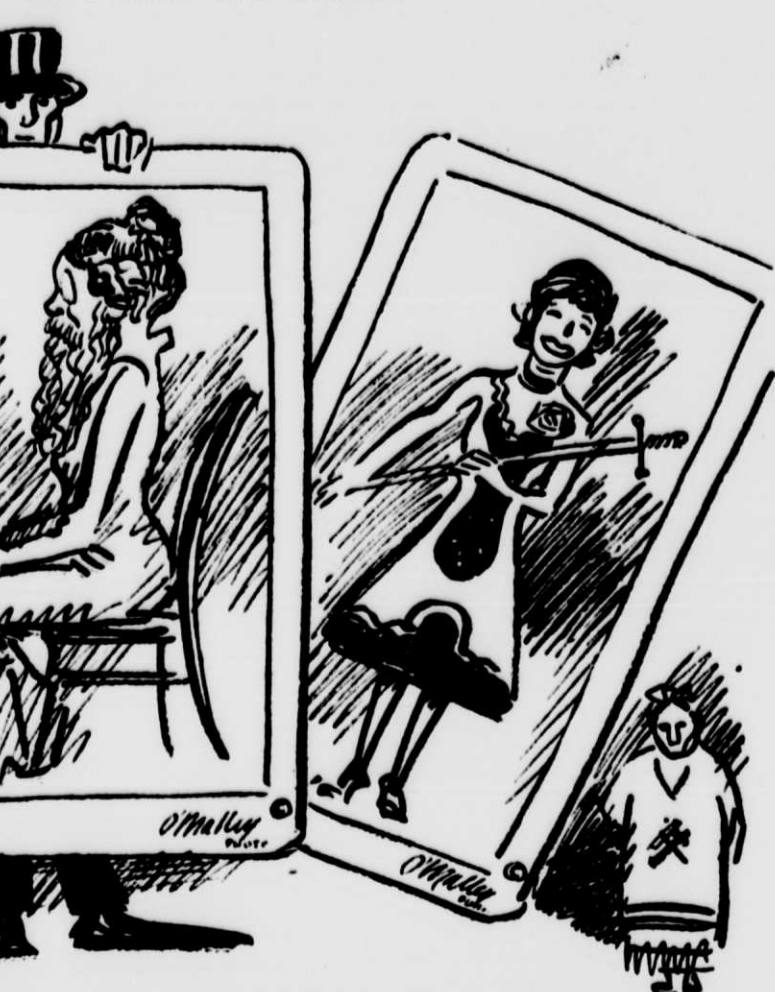
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only Pinheadese, but they would not be comforted. Their grief was too great.

When silent suffering could be borne no longer Miss Schiltzie suddenly burst forth in the Pinheaded language and told us in detail the cause of the general sadness. To begin with she and her noted uncle and Eddie Masher, the Skeleton Dude; Hugo, the French giant who wants to go home and enlist but will not be accepted in the French army because of the shadowiness of the trenches and the consequent certain death of Hugo; the Princess Wee Wee, the Baron Pained, midget; Miss Cleve Gill, mianess, and all the others had signed contracts to appear in the Barnum & Bailey circus on the understanding that the show would settle down in Madison Square Garden for at least a year's run. But not five minutes before we arrived in Freak Hall last Friday night word had filtered in from the arena that the Messrs. Barnum and Bailey management, always ready to try anything once, had suddenly decided to quit Manhattan next Saturday night and take the circuit out on a tour of the one night stands.

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